

Stef Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*, New York 2013, Palgrave Macmillan, xi+170 p., 54,54 € /77,92 €, ISBN 978-0-230-23007-1

Craps offers a postcolonial critique of European-centered concepts of trauma. He does not aim at delegitimizing the experience of trauma itself but wants to expand and saturate the established canon of trauma theory with the experiences of communities that have suffered long-term and chronic abuses due to the effects of imperial and colonial histories. Trauma does not need to "be abandoned," he writes, "but can and should be reshaped, resituated, and redirected so as to foster attunement to previously unheard suffering" (p. 37).

Craps, who directs the Center for Literature and Trauma at Belgium's Ghent University, supports and illustrates his theoretical discussion with ample examples from literary works (mostly novels). Stating that standard explanations of trauma neglect the effects of "cumulative trauma suffered by victims of racism or other forms of structural oppression" (p. 4), he offers conceptual suggestions that attend to the experiences of non-Western subjects. He identifies three major issues that narrowly limit dominant trauma theory: first, current trauma theory focuses on the idea of a single catastrophic event that shatters a person's or a community's sense of stability; second, it remains centered on the medical and psychological dimension of traumatic experiences; third, it claims to be transhistorical and universal. What, one may ask, is problematic about these assumptions?

First, the event-based model, according to Craps, is too narrow because it understands traumatic rupture as singularly catastrophic; from there, it is easy to leap to the assumption that particular events, like the Holocaust, are unique. This neglects, however, the possibility that trauma may be an ongoing experience because the original source of injustice has never been addressed or restored. Consequently, destructive or even lethal repercussions continue to linger in a community's life. The history of slavery would be one such example: the original traumata of dislocation, severe violation, and sustained cruelty are replicated in social structures of racism and discrimination today. Whereas the single event-model works well, for example, to understand the trauma of the Holocaust, it does not account adequately for long-term experiences of subjugation and abuse that continue into the present (like slavery or racism). The "everyday life...of subordinated subjects," Lauren Berlant observes (and Craps quotes her approvingly), "is an ordinary and ongoing thing that is underdescribed" in traditional trauma theory (p. 126).

Second, conceiving trauma mainly in medical and psychological terms is problematic insofar as it neglects the structural dimension of social and historical injustices. Limited in this way, it echoes a "Freudian model" (p. 31) that requires therapeutic intervention of working through the damaging effects of a traumatic event. But such a model does not adequately address the "collective nature" of historical trauma of "formerly colonized and enslaved" people (p. 63). Historical scars cannot be reduced to a psychological "working through" since the wounds remain open under present conditions. Hence, Western-based ideas of trauma therapy, when imported to non-Western countries, may inadvertently reinscribe asymmetric power relations rather than contribute to healing. Craps refers here particularly to the technique of witnessing, in which the retelling of traumatic memories is encouraged in the presence of an empathetic listener—a "central tenet of Western trauma counselling" that can undermine indigenous and "local coping strategies" (p. 23). This witnessing technique assumes, for one, that "working through" is possible because a past traumatic event can be integrated into a stable present; yet, for oppressed communities the present is anything but stable. It further assumes that "bearing witness," in which an empathetic listener becomes a "vicarious victim" (p. 42), as suggested by Felman and Laub, relieves the burden for the primary witness (the traumatized person). According to Craps, this model depoliticizes the act of witnessing: it diminishes the political agency of the traumatized person and also diffuses a "sense of political urgency" (p. 42) that may call us into an ethical obligation of political activism.